

WESTMINSTER
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SERMON

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The End of Unbelief

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None of the gospels seek to suppress the doubt that swirled among Jesus' disciples after the resurrection. The idea that a person once dead and buried would rise defies human logic.

Each year immediately following Easter the lectionary prescribes gospel stories of several disciples' inability to believe God raised Christ. These followers ask the questions we might ask if we'd been given the chance.

The Gospel of John profiles Thomas. Since he is unique to John's gospel, let's remember this gospel's uniqueness as well.

John opens with lofty poetry reminiscent of the first book in our bible, Genesis. "In the beginning was the word and the word was with God and the word was God," aligning the incarnate Jesus as one with God. John proclaims at the onset, God sent Jesus into the world as the "light shining in the darkness."

Every miracle performed by Jesus in this gospel aims to spark the belief that he is God's son. A drumbeat pervades this gospel of Jesus opening eyes long shut to see the abundance of life, to see those in need of healing, to see corruption, and to see that elusive yet palpable grace and truth.

For context, today's passage begins on Easter. Earlier that day, at the empty tomb, Mary said, "I have seen the Lord."

Please pray with me.

*Jesus, bringer of peace (Author unknown)
Who steps into our darkneses
And shows us your wounds.*

*Come in, come in,
to the closed and locked
places of our lives
In the wonder and mystery
of your resurrected newness.*

*Teach us the worth
Of living both resurrected
and wounded*

*That we may in turn bring peace
to the dark places of your world. Amen.*

John 20

¹⁹When it was evening on that day, the first day of the week, and the doors of the house where the disciples had met were locked for fear of the Jews, Jesus came and stood among them and said, "Peace be with you."

²⁰After he said this, he showed them his hands and his side. Then the disciples rejoiced when they saw the Lord. ²¹Jesus said to them again, "Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, so I send you."

²²When he had said this, he breathed on them and said to them, "Receive the Holy Spirit. ²³If you forgive the

sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained.”

²⁴But Thomas (who was called the Twin), one of the twelve, was not with them when Jesus came. ²⁵So the other disciples told him, “We have seen the Lord.” But he said to them, “Unless I see the mark of the nails in his hands, and put my finger in the mark of the nails and my hand in his side, I will not believe.”

²⁶A week later Jesus’ disciples were again in the house, and Thomas was with them. Although the doors were shut, he came and stood among them and said, “Peace be with you.” ²⁷Then he said to Thomas, “Put your finger here and see my hands. Reach out your hand and put it in my side. Do not doubt but believe.”

²⁸Thomas answered him, “My Lord and my God!” ²⁹Jesus said to him, “Have you believed because you have seen me? Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe.” ³⁰Now Jesus did many other signs in the presence of his disciples, which are not written in this book. ³¹But these are written so that you may come to believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that through believing you may have life in his name.

When we look back on the course of human history, the decisive moments of new awakenings were often precipitated by some brave soul’s skepticism and doubt.

Today, the hero is Thomas.

Notably, the original Greek in the Gospel of John does not use the word “doubt.” The text says “unbelief.” Possibly, translators merely wanted to vary the language centuries ago and we’ve never changed it since we’d already pegged Thomas as *doubting* Thomas.

Today, let’s use “disbelief” or “unbelief” rather than “doubt” to remember our faith travels along a continuum between two extremes. Disbelief is a safe place until we can experience something with our own eyes, ears, and touch. But it may also be a place to hide our fears when we refuse to step out of our intellectual comfort zone.

You may sit here, in disbelief of Jesus’ resurrection. Put aside how it happened. Instead, ask why.

In John’s gospel, the key to interpreting much of its stories and message lies in verse 3:16. Martin Luther called it the gospel in miniature: “For God so loved the world, God gave God’s only son that those who believe in him will not perish but have everlasting life.” It holds such weight among Christians that it appears as just “3:16” at football games, on bumper stickers, and billboards.

A few verses later, a more overlooked statement tells the negative consequences: “whoever disobeys the Son will not see life; but must endure God’s wrath.” (Jn 3:36).

In John's gospel, sin is not related to moral transgressions. Sin is simply unbelief. The sum of the gospel – the stories of healing, Jesus' teachings, the raising of Lazarus – all build the belief that Jesus could only do these signs as God's son.

Let's return to our story. That very first evening, Jesus appears among the disciples despite the fact that they are hiding behind locked doors. He breathes upon them saying "peace be with you," the same peace Jesus promises on the night of last supper. He shows them his wounded hands and side – the disciples see Jesus' body – and the disciples accept the risen Christ as true.

Unfortunately, Thomas is absent. We do not know why he missed this event. In any case, Thomas does not see Jesus, and he will not ascent: "Unless I see the mark of the nails in his hands... and my hand in his side, I will not believe" (20:25).

Honestly, our translation fails the Greek. He did not want to touch the wounds but rather thrust his hand into them, deep into Jesus' body.

When he says, "I will not believe" he does so with an enduring verb tense that really means; "I will not believe, forever."

Was Thomas acting like a petulant child, wanting to be included in the clique's secret? Consider, Thomas had been with Jesus for years, devoted to following Jesus and continues to risk his life by associating with the other disciples. At this

junction, Thomas must wonder not just if Christ is risen, but everything his life has stood for. He is also grieving for someone he saw die and dearly loves...many of us understand this grief. But, to thrust his hands into a mortal wound?

Thomas needs to make his own life-or-death decision. If those wounds caused Jesus' death, then for him to walk around after the grave represents God's willingness to enter every aspect of suffering and death. The resurrection shows the depth of God's love for our lives and desire for us to receive eternal life promised long ago.

We know how it turns out. Jesus returns, again passes through locked doors, again says "peace be with you." This time he invites Thomas to inspect his wounded body.

Christ spoke, "do not be unbelieving but believe."

It is easy to overlook what is missing. Despite demanding a grisly inspection, Thomas never touches Jesus' wounds. He believes. He is the first in this gospel to proclaim, "My Lord and my God" (20:28). At that moment, Thomas saw Jesus as one with God. Thomas saw the reality of God's ability to transform our greatest fear, death, into life.

Some interpreters of this story will hold it up as evidence we are to simply trust others, put aside our intellect, and blindly believe. I disagree. We each come to faith through our doubt, and this is often a painful journey.

In *Uncommon Gratitude: Alleluia For All That Is*, Joan Chittister and Rowan Williams write:

There is simply a point in life when reason fails to satisfy our awareness of what is clearly unreasonable and clearly real at the same time – like love and self-sacrifice and trust and good. Data does not exist to explain these unexplainable things. Then only the doubt that opens our hearts to what we cannot comprehend...that makes us rabidly pursue the truth... that moves us beyond complacency...that corrects mythologies not worthy of faith can lead us to the purer air of spiritual truth. Then we are ready to move beyond the senses into the mystical, where faith shows us those penetrating truths the eye cannot see.¹

Jesus tells them, “Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe” (20:29) and in doing so includes all of us.

Let me close with a story.

John Updike’ Lutheran upbringing influenced his poetry and prose. One of his earliest short stories, “Pigeon Feathers,” a family moves to a farm in a rural community just as their son, David, enters confirmation. As with many rural communities the minister of their local Lutheran church serves multiple parishes, is in his first call, and does not know where the rubber meets the road.

¹ Joan Chittister and Rowan Williams, *Uncommon Gratitude: Alleluia For All That Is*, (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2014).

He pointedly asks the inexperienced Reverend Dobson “About the Resurrection of the body – are we conscience between the time when we die and the day of Judgement?”

Dobson replied, unsatisfactory to David, “No, I suppose not.”

This sent David reeling. What happens the soul? Is it just lying there? David wants nothing to do with rest, sleep, inaction. He wants to know if he will live.

At home, he found his late grandfather’s bible and tried to find the passage where Jesus says to the good thief on the cross, “Today shalt thou be with me in paradise.”

Since he’d never read the bible before, he did not know how. Updike writes, “What was so embarrassing about being caught at it was that he detested the apparatus of piety. Fusty churches, creaking hymns, ugly Sunday school teachers and their stupid leaflets – he hated everything about them but the promise they held out, a promise in the most perverse way, as if the homeliest crone in the kingdom were given the prince’s hand, made every good and real thing, ballgames and jokes...possible.”

Caught with the book in hand, his mother pursues an exasperating conversation for both of them. She offers platitudes. He wants proof.

The story continues of his coming of age, receiving a Remington .22 and learning to shoot. One day, his grandmother tells him to get rid of the pigeons that nest in the barn.

Reluctantly he shoots six. Not the entire flock, but enough to send the others flying away. Then tasked with burying them, he finds a patch of ground, digs a hole. When placing them in their grave, he realizes he'd never seen a bird up close.

“The feathers were more wonderful than dog’s hair, for each filament was shaped within the shape of the feather, and the feathers in turn were trimmed to fit a pattern that flowed without error across the bird’s body...No two alike, designs executed, it seemed, in a controlled rapture, with a joy that hung in the air above and behind him....Into the fragrant open earth he dropped one...as he fitted the last two...and stood up, crusting coverings were lifted from him, and with a slipping sensation along his nerves that seemed to give the air hands, he was robed in this certainty: that God who had lavished such craft upon these worthless birds would not destroy His whole creation by refusing to let David live forever.²

It is not so much a story of Jesus’ resurrection that John tells as it is the story of Thomas’s rise to faith. And, as Jesus suggests, anyone can do it. You don’t have to put your fingers

² John Updike, “Pigeon Feathers,” *The Early Stories: 1953-1975*, (New York: Random House, 2004).

in his hands or your hands in his side. Thomas did not reach into the wounds, rather God reached into his heart with a life sustaining confidence. And as John has explained, these things are not written so that you may have the facts, but so that you may believe.



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